

EBARIO UNDERGOES REBRANDING

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KOTA SAMARAHAN: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak's (Unimas) multi-award winning eBario project is undergoing a transformation and re-branding in response to its evolving role in a rapidly changing world.

A press release said the original computer-based telecentre is no longer relevant to the tech-savvy people of Bario, where the device of choice is now the smartphone.

In addition to continuing to stimulate local development, eBario's role will now focus on managing the knowledge that technology makes increasingly accessible.

Adjacent to the centre in Bario, residents are constructing a community museum, which eBario will augment with a virtual component by digitising Kelabit culture and traditions for the benefit of future generations.

Radio Bario also plays an important role in helping to preserve the Kelabit language.

As more researchers from Unimas and other institutions, including from overseas, take an interest in issues such as the sustainability of the Heart of Borneo, community resilience in the face of climate change and the contribution of traditional knowledge to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), eBario will play a pivotal role as a research centre in promoting the highlands as a research destination.

It will facilitate research activities, communicate the results to the world and make them relevant and useful to the residents of the highlands – bringing the outside world to Bario.

eBario started as a telecentre initiative in the late 90s, providing computers and Internet access to the then remote and isolated village.

In 1998, the population was dwindling; communications with the outside world were rudimentary; mobile phones were not available; no one in Bario knew anything of the Internet; nobody regularly used computers; households had to generate their own electricity; agriculture depended on imported labour; there was no road access and less than one flight per day from Miri.

Today, 10 years after the project was handed over to the community, ex-residents are returning to live in Bario; everyone knows and uses the Internet; computers are well-known and mobile phones are near ubiquitous; Radio Bario operates as Malaysia's first ever community radio station; a solar-farm provides 24-hour electricity; agriculture is mechanised; the highlands road network has greatly expanded, including access to Miri, from which there are upwards of three daily flights to Bario.

Concurrent with these changes, the socio-cultural-economic and demographic profile of Bario has also changed.

With easier access, tourism is now a major source of income; once scarce goods are now commonplace; households

boast a wide range of electrical appliances and there are even occasional problems with road traffic.

Bario has also been elevated to a sub-district, with a new administrative centre.

The eBario initiative can justifiably claim some influence in bringing about these changes, either directly or indirectly.